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ABSTRACT

England's trend toward encouraging 4-year-old children to begin infant school at the beginning of the year in which they become 5 years of age led the British Association for Early Childhood Education to investigate the needs of 4-year-olds in school. At the end of a year's discussion, 56 working groups completed a questionnaire which has raised several issues. While respondents disagreed about the needs of 4-year-olds in school, they agreed substantially about environmental characteristics appropriate to 4-year-old children, the need for a teacher/student ratio of 1:13 or less, the provision of a trained nursery nurse, training for teachers, and teachers' support needs. Respondents disagreed about full-day versus half-day scheduling, incorporation of nursery classes in schools, duration of nursery experience for students, and the value of placing 4-year-olds in primary classes for the purpose of socializing them to a work ethic. Concluding remarks emphasized the need to ensure that any child entering school under the age of 5 years is provided an appropriate physical environment and is taught by appropriately trained staff who provide a developmental curriculum and recognize the developmental differences between 4- and 5-year-olds. (RH)

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The Needs of Four Year Old Children in School

One of the critical areas of concern in English education today relates to the education of four year old children. Since the publication of the Plowden Report (1967) when it was recommended that part-time nursery education should be available for a 'maximum of 90% of four year old children', the question of provision for this age range has been a constant subject for discussion among parents, politicians and early childhood educators.

The numbers of both three and four year old children in state schools has risen steadily, the latest statistics (November 1986) indicating that some 43% of our three and four year old children attend nursery and primary schools. Further examination of these figures indicate that 301,000 four year olds, (74% of the age range) now attend school and of these 245,000 are in infant classes in primary schools. The vast majority of these children attend full-time.

Entry into primary classes below statutory school age is not a new phenomenon, (the Report of the Women Inspectors 1905, highlighted this problem at the turn of the century), but the last few years has seen a dramatic increase in the number of children below school age receiving full-time education in primary schools. Why has this sudden increase in the number of children to be found in classroom situations different from those recommended by both the Plowden Report (1967) and Framework for Expansion (1972)?

There are a number of possible reasons why this has occured but probably the most crucial is that falling rolls have resulted in many primary schools having empty classrooms and some teachers being threatened with redundancy. As a result some local education authorities have decided to admit children into primary school at the beginning of the year in which they will become five.

As early admission into school is non-statutory, the type of provision is at the discretion of the LEA's and the reports from NFER, BAECE 1985 and CASE 1986 have indicated that there is a wide variety of provision with huge differences in resources and staffing. Furthermore, in some local education authorities nursery provision is mainly for three year olds, since the parents of the older children are being positively encouraged to enrol their children in infant classes once they have reached their fourth birthday. In these parts of the country a situation has arisen where children are removed from high quality nursery provision at the end of only one or two terms to enter classes with a teacher/pupil ratio of 1:25 or more.

These differences are not just material, they reflect different philosophical approaches towards early admission and the needs of four year old children. On the one hand there are those who see early admission of four year olds as a means of extending nursery provision and there are others who see it as an opportunity to lengthen the child's exposure to traditional infant education. The latter argument is often welcomed by parents and others who are concerned by the later statistics of achievement in school of the summer term children, which seem to suggest that children who started school early achieved better academically than those who

started later. Recent research, though, has shown that 'early entry into infant classes was not found to increase children's educational potential. This suggests that the curriculum of the under fives as practical in local education authority classes and playgroups was more effective than those of infant-reception classes' (Osborn et al 1984). Furthermore, there is increasing research evidence to suggest that nursery education may have positive long term effects (Jowett & Sylva 1986, Woodhead 1985).

These findings reinforce the views of many early childhood educators in the United Kingdom who have queried whether the provision for four year old children in primary classes is adequate in terms of staffing, curriculum and equipment.

This trend towards encouraging four year olds to begin infant school at the beginning of the year in which they will become five years of age encouraged one of the leading organisations in the country concerned with the education and care of children age 3-8 years, the British Association for Early Childhood Education (BAECE) to investigate the needs of four year old children in school.' This project was led by myself as the Chairman of the Research Committee.

In December 1983, fifty-six branches of this organisation from all parts of the United Kingdom set up Working Groups which involved approximately eleven hundren members in a series of workshops and discussions concerned with the appropriate environment and curriculum for four year old children. Members initially looked at and found in the variety of provision, wide differences in resources and staffing and many were amazed to find not only that nursery provision was non-existent in some areas of the country but that in some local education authorities the nursery provision was mainly for three year olds, with children entering primary classes once they had reached their fourth birthday. In these circumstances there was frequently teacher/pupil ratios of 1:25 or more.

Not only is the teacher/pupil ratio seen as less than desirable, but traditionally we have always believed that three and four year olds gain many valuable learning experiences as a result of working together in groups. In removing the four year olds, the members of BAECE feel that not only will these children be overwhelmed by the activities and organisation of the primary school but they will miss many oportunities for growth and personal development which come as a result of spending two years in a learning environment especially prepared for the three and four year old age range. Furthermore, the three year olds will not have the benefit of being with and learning from four year olds. The Working Groups then continued to discuss such issues as the adult/child ratios, training of personnel, parental involvememt and type of curriculum felt to be appropriate for four year old children.

At the end of a year of meetings and discussions these fifty-six Working Groups were asked to complete a questionnaire which, on analysis, has raised a number of interesting issues.

Main Findings of the BAECE Investigation

As was to be expected there were wide differences of opinion

among the membership concerning the needs of four year old children in school but there are some very important areas upon which there is almost total agreement. It was generally agreed that children under statutory school age who attend school, whether they were in nursery classes or in infant classes in primary schools:

A. Should be in an environment where:

i. there is ample space, both indoors and outdoors;

ii. the outside play area is separated from the rest of the school;

iii. the toilets are located adjacent to the classroom and separate from the rest of the school;

iv. the equipment and apparatus are suitable for a true 'nursery curriculum';

v. children are allowed freedom to select their own activities for at least half of the time during their school day;

vi. children are allowed to play freely, as it is a basic need for every child

B. Should be in classes where the staff/pupil ratio is 1:13 or better.

C. Should be in classes where the teacher is assisted by a trained nursery nurse.

D. Should be taught by teachers who have had training for this age range.

The questionnaire and discussions also revealed that these early childhood educators wanted:

a) further in-service training to be made available for both the teachers and their nursery nurses.

b) training and help to enable staff to cope with young children with special educational needs who were being integrated into ordinary schooling.

c) parents to be involved in their children's education. Deep concern was expressed about the very special problems of working parents and how best they could be involved in their children's schooling.

d) curriculum guidelines for four year olds to be formulated by the members of BAECE.

Areas on which there was not a general consensus of agreement among the membership concerned:

i) full or part-time attendance by four year old children;

ii) whether a nursery class as an integral part of the school constituted 'proper nursery provision';

iii) whether two years in a nursery environment was sufficiently challenging for children;

iv) the value of placing four year olds in primary classes in order to establish a 'good/correct working ethic'.

Conclusion

The results of this investigation have been used by early childhood educators in both the professional and voluntary sectors to highlight the position of the many four year old children in primary classrooms. It is appreciated that the current financial cuts in education will prevent a widespread increase in nursery education throughout the country but the investigators are concerned that pressure must be placed upon local education authorities and head teachers of primary schools to ensure that any child entering school under the age of five is provided with not only the appropriate physical environment but is taught by appropriately trained staff who provide a curriculum which takes account of the developmental needs of four year old children. 'Better Schools' acknowledged the problems for teachers of having the two age groups in a single class. Some LEAs have produced the kind of staffing ratios, ancillary help and flexibility which is required to meet the needs of our year olds. However, not only are extra staffing and material resources required but the curricular provision must recognise that there are developmental differences between four and five year olds, a point stressed by both BAECE and OMEP.

However difficult the task, it may be that in grappling with the problems of providing an appropriate learning environment to meet the individual needs of four year olds it will also lead to a reappraisal of the curriculum for five year olds and to a greater realisation in some schools that there are also wide individual differences in this age range.

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The Educational System of England and Wales

Some terminology

Statutory (compulsory schooling)
Compulsory schooling starts at the beginning of the term following a child's fifth birthday.

Nursery Education

Provision for children below age of 5 is VOLUNTARY

Ifprovided it is available in separate nursery schools or nursery classes attached to primary schools.

Staff/Pupil 1:13 or better
normally 1 qualified nursery teacher and 1 qualified nursery nurse for 26 children.

The majority of children attend part-time.

Primary Education

Caters for children from 5-11 years of age
Children attend full-time (normally 9.00-15.30 hours)
Staff/Pupil Ratio 1:25+ could be 1:35.

Primary classes for children aged 5-7 years are termed Infant Classes.

Audrey Curtis
~~March~~ 1987.
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